

Revisiting 9/11, Reworking 911

by {ga=jbrustein}

Monday, May 24, 2004 12:00 AM



[The 9/11 Commission's Report on Emergency Response](#) , with links to testimony of 13 witnesses in the hearing.

Testimony, Questions and Answers:

[Michael Bloomberg](#)

[Rudolph Giuliani](#)

[former Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, former Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, former Office of Emergency Management Director](#)

[Richard Sheirer](#)

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[Emergency Communications Systems And Equipment by Laura Forlano](#)

Just days before the 9/11 Commission came to New York to examine how the city responds to emergencies, smoke began to rise before dawn from the subway station at Bowling Green, not far from Ground Zero.

Soon the sounds of sirens and helicopters broke the early Sunday morning calm, as hundreds of rescue workers strapped oxygen tanks on their backs and dashed into the station, responding to a report that there had been two explosions. Police officers stalked the streets

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with automatic weapons and dogs; firefighters rushed people from the station into waiting ambulances.

This was only a drill. But two things happened that had not been planned for -- and that inadvertently illustrate some of the core challenges facing the city's system of emergency response: A fight reportedly broke out between a firefighter and a police officer. And an actual suspicious package was found in the subway.

The call went out: Stop the drill. Police officers from the bomb squad investigated what turned out to be a pile of old clothes.

Almost three years after New York City suffered the worst attack in American history, some basic questions remain unsettled: Could some of the death and destruction have been avoided? Will anything be different if and when there is another emergency of such magnitude?

9/11 COMMISSION IN NEW YORK



"Catastrophic emergencies and attacks have acts of great heroism attached to them. They have acts of ingenious creativity attached to them and they have

The answer former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani gave to the first question, when he testified in front

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of the 9/11 Commission, was no. He began his testimony by asking the commissioners not to blame anyone for the deaths on September 11 but the people he said were solely responsible for them -- Al Qaeda, the terrorists.

Yes, the mayor conceded, mistakes happened, as they would in any catastrophe, [but his testimony, which was largely an account of his personal experience on September 11](#), sought to emphasize the heroism of the rescue workers. His eloquence neutralized the commissioners, whose subsequent questioning veered toward the reverential.

This did not sit well with some family members of firefighters killed on 9/11 who were in the audience at the New School. Several people, offended that the commission wasn't being tough enough on Giuliani, jumped to their feet and began yelling, interrupting the hearing.

There was some irony in this. The hearings the previous day had elicited the exact opposite response, critics saying the 9/11 Commission had been too combative, when it [harshly grilled](#) three of Giuliani's former commissioners.

One of the members of the 9/11 Commission, John Lehman, called the city's system of emergency response "dysfunctional," "a scandal," "not worthy of the Boy Scouts, let alone this great city." Another member, Timothy Roemer, asked how the Office Of Emergency Management could possibly have been put in the World Trade Center itself, "where the terrorists had struck in 1993. Why put it in one of the most likely places [for terrorists to] come back and hit us again?"

"We have to ask hard questions," a third member, Jamie Gorelick, said, "...because if we don't we cannot ensure greater safety from this day forward."

It is hard to detach from the [emotional recollections of the past](#) in order to piece together a hard-nosed assessment of what went wrong on 9/11, determine how well those problems have been fixed in the three years since, and thus predict whether or not New York is better prepared for another large-scale emergency.

Based on the reports and testimony from the 9/11 Commission, as well as testimony, investigations and critiques over the past three years, there are four areas most in need of attention:

1. How effective are skyscraper **evacuation** plans?
2. How well do emergency response agencies in New York **coordinate** with one another?
3. Have barriers to **communication** between rescue workers been eliminated?
4. How can New York get adequate **funding** to prepare itself for future emergencies?

1. SKYSCRAPER EVACUATION PLANS

For fires and other catastrophic events in skyscrapers, common practice has long been to tell people elsewhere in the building to stay where they are. The reason for this is that, in the past, evacuations often wound up injuring more people than the fire itself. The disorderly evacuation of the World Trade Center in 1993 after it had been bombed by terrorists was just such a case.

9/11: Evacuation Plans For The Twin Towers

After 1993, the Port Authority looked to improve its drilling and evacuation procedures at the World Trade Center. It enjoyed a certain amount of success: most people interviewed by the 9/11 Commission said they felt more prepared for an emergency in 2001 than they had been in 1993.

On 9/11, people in the World Trade Center [were told to stay put](#) . Others who had begun to evacuate were ordered to return to their desks.

But the emergency plan for the World Trade Center had several gaps. In the 1993 bombing, a helicopter had rescued people from the roof of the towers. New York City's rescue workers,

however, had ruled out such rooftop rescues in the future. The problem was -- nobody ever told the occupants of this change in procedure.

Those who were trapped above the fire on September 11th may have headed towards the roof, only to find the doors locked. And while the Port Authority had ruled out rooftop rescue, it did not have an alternative for those who were trapped on the floors above where the planes hit.

It is unclear that any emergency plan could have prevented many deaths in a situation as severe as 9/11. But several members of the 9/11 Commission lamented that, because federal intelligence agencies didn't communicate the threat of an airborne attack to those planning safety measures for New York City's high-rises, no one even attempted to find a way to deal with such an event.

SINCE 9/11: In Evacuation Plans, Little Has Changed

Allan Reiss of the Port Authority testified ([pdf format](#)) that little had changed in nationally accepted evacuation standards. He complained that standard evacuation plans throughout the country still do not advise skyscraper tenants never to flee towards the roof in an emergency.

For emergencies smaller than the three five-alarm fires that burned in the World Trade Center on September 11, it still makes the most sense to have people stay at their desks, according to several of those who testified last week.

But Reiss said that watching the Twin Towers collapse had made people react differently to all emergencies. Evacuations plans should take into account how people will realistically react in an emergency situation, he said. And the collapse of the Twin Towers has changed that.

“Everyone including myself, and we’ve had a couple of fires in the building that I’m now a tenant in; that fire alarm goes off and you smell smoke you’re down those stairs instantaneously,” he said. “The codes need to recognize it.”

2. COOPERATING OR COMPETING? INTERAGENCY RIVALRIES

The [“Battle of the Badges”](#) “the rivalry between New York City’s Fire and Police Departments” has existed for decades.

The heads of the departments have tried to explain the rift as nothing more than isolated conflicts between individual “knuckleheads” at emergency scenes. The occasional fistfight, they insist, does not indicate a larger dispute between the agencies themselves.

But others concede that a power struggle between the fire and police departments has hampered emergency operations in the past. The police department’s Emergency Services Unit, which carries out functions that in other cities would be handled by the fire department, has increasingly encroached on the fire’s department’s ground.

Jerome Hauer ([testimony in pdf format](#)) was appointed by Mayor Giuliani as the first commissioner of the Office of Emergency Management, established largely to find a way to solve battles between the police and fire departments. The office was credited for other programs, but it did not manage to create a way to bring the two agencies together.

9/11: Separate Command Posts

The Office of Emergency Management faced an immediate, and ultimately insurmountable, obstacle on September 11: its headquarters on the 23 floor of Seven World Trade Center had to be evacuated. The building later collapsed. Largely as a result, the newly homeless agency was ineffectual during the rescue at the Twin Towers.

But it is unclear whether the Office of Emergency Management was prepared to play a significant coordinating role on 9/11, even if had not been sidelined by the destruction of its headquarters.

Nor were police and fire departments willing to work within such a structure. Indeed, the police and fire departments set up separate command posts on September 11, and operated largely independently of one another. Lead officials from each agency insisted that, while technical problems at times hampered communications, the lack of coordination had no concrete effect on 9/11.

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Still, the lack of an effective way for rescue agencies to work together on major emergencies has been singled out by members of the commission and experts in the field as [the major shortcoming in the city's emergency response](#)

SINCE 9/11: A New Attempt At Unified Emergency Response

Eight years after the creation of the Office of Emergency Management “ and four days before the 9/11 Commission arrived in New York “ Mayor Michael Bloomberg presented [his plan for coordinating the emergency response efforts of fire, police and other rescue agencies](#).
(in pdf format).

For small incidents, the plan designates a lead agency. For larger emergencies, it lists several agencies that will work together. Instead of naming one agency to take the lead, it calls on each one to focus on its “core competency.”

Critics have complained that this plan ducks [the real issue](#) that needs to be resolved: who is in charge in a large-scale rescue effort? Additionally, it lessens the power of the Office of Emergency Management to make the decision when agencies disagree over who should do what.

Many have described the plan as incomplete.

“They obviously didn’t want to sit at the commission and say “we still don’t have one,” said Peter Vallone, head of the City Council’s public safety committee. “That’s a large part of why they got it done [now], and I hope it’s a work in progress.”

Vallone has called for City Council hearings to review the plan on June 2.

SINCE 9/11: Persisting Overlaps in Jurisdiction

The reason that the city has not been able to decide how to divide control over large emergencies is that the police department and the fire department are competing to carry out

the same tasks, according to many experts. In this regard, New York is unique among large American cities.

Until this is resolved, they say, the city will not be able to accomplish the kind of sensible command system that Mayor Bloomberg had hoped to create with his recent plan.

“It’s a large problem because when you have two different agencies doing the same things, it is certainly not efficient, and not cost effective,” said Glenn Corbett professor of fire science at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “And more importantly, it’s an impediment to a really well-defined incident command structure.”

Corbett, and Hauer, among others, agree that the best way to resolve this problem is to strengthen the Office of Emergency Management so that it can dictate to the competing agencies exactly which tasks fall into whose jurisdiction. Others have suggested creating a public safety czar with similar powers.

Dennis Smith ([testimony in pdf format](#)), author of *Report from Ground Zero*, told the commission that he believes the conflict between fire and police has become unmanageable without more drastic action. He suggests removing the rescue functions from both agencies and creating a separate Rescue Emergency Services Department.

3. COMMUNICATION FAILURES

In large rescues, different agencies come together with crowds of civilians. Being able to communicate is critical. Communications between rescue workers, and between rescue workers and civilians, were hampered both by inadequate technology and by problems in the way that communication for emergencies was planned.

9/11: Rescue Workers Didn't Communicate Well With 911 Dispatchers

When they arrived at the Twin Towers on 9/11, rescue workers decided to evacuate the buildings almost immediately. Because intercoms in the buildings were disabled from the impact of the planes, firefighters and police officers in the lobby could not communicate directly with people on upper floors. As a result, the only way that many people in the towers could get information was by calling 911.

Dispatchers, unaware of the evacuation plan, told callers to stay put, keeping in line with the pre-existing evacuation plan. Firefighters and police officers on the scene did not contact dispatchers to let them know of the evacuation plans; dispatchers did not grasp the unique nature of the situation.

SINCE 9/11: Better Links For Dispatchers, But Still Just One-Way Communication

911 dispatchers have also been brought closer to rescue teams: Police commissioner Raymond Kelly testified ([testimony in .pdf format](#)) that today, a platoon commander monitors information from various sources and instructs dispatchers how to respond.

As several commissioners pointed out during the hearings, the dispatchers could have also received valuable information from those calling 911 about the situation on floors high in the towers. Because there was no plan to use 911 to collect information, rescue workers did not know what was happening above them.

The commissioner's goal of using 911 as an interactive communication source, however, has not been realized.

9/11: Rescue Workers Couldn't Receive Information

Rescue workers, notably firefighters in the North Tower, said they had no idea of what was going on around them.

"People watching on TV certainly had more knowledge of what was happening a hundred floors above us than we did in the lobby," [said Joseph Pfeifer, an assistant deputy fire chief working in the North Tower.](#)

Rescue workers faced several challenges in getting information:

- Overworked Radios – Radios were overwhelmed with the volume of calls being made.

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While both police and fire experienced problems, it was the firefighters who had the most problems.

- The “Repeater Channel” â€“ The Port Authority installed an extra radio channel especially for the Twin Towers after firefighters had faced overloaded radio frequencies in 1993. But the fire department was unable to use this “repeater” channel. Although the channel was working, Pfeifer’s team mistakenly believed it was not, and turned it off. [It is not clear what led to this mistake.](#)

- Lack of Interagency Communication â€“ A police helicopter warned police officers that the North Tower was going to collapse 18 minutes before it did. Because the interagency radios were not working, firefighters did not receive the warning; 121 died when the building fell.

SINCE 9/11: Communication Improvements

Since 9/11, the fire and police departments have worked to close the gaps in the communications, and to upgrade the technology that failed on 9/11. (See also Gotham Gazette's tech topic page update looking at [emergency communications systems and equipment](#))

Structural Changes to Improve Communication Across Agency Lines

Today, an FDNY battalion chief reports every day to police headquarters, and a firefighter flies with each police helicopter. Similarly, a police captain spends his days at the Fire Department.

Technical Upgrades

Firefighters have received new radios that allow for higher call volume; police officers have installed video feeds in their helicopters to allow people on the ground to observe their own situations from a wider perspective.

The city also recently tested a [computer-based interagency radio](#) , which will allow all city agencies to communicate on the same frequency. While his agency has only recently begun to use the radios, Office of Emergency Management Commissioner Joe Bruno said that they seem to work well.

4. FUNDING

When testifying at the commission, current New York officials took pains to direct the panel’s attention to an issue that did not exist on 9/11: Homeland Security Funding.

New York State receives less Homeland Security funding per capita than every state but California; the amount of money that New York City receives is set to drop from \$188 million in fiscal year 2003 to \$96 million in fiscal year 2004.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg [reminded commissioners](#) that New York State received \$5.47 per capita in homeland security grants last year. Wyoming received \$38.31, and American Samoa brought in over \$100 per person.

Mayor Bloomberg described this as “the kind of shortsighted ‘me first’ nonsense that gives Washington a bad name. It unfortunately has the effect of aiding and abetting those who hate us and plot against us.”

New York has [fared so poorly in relation to other areas of the country](#) because only 20 percent of the funding available is given out according to the threat that a specific area is under. Originally, New York was one of seven cities in the high threat program; it received about one quarter of funding with that program. Since then, the number of cities has grown to 50, and 30 transportation systems have been added. Now New York receives less than 7 percent of the total.

Changing the Formula

Several efforts to change the way Homeland Security grants are given are in the works, including a [bill in the House of Representatives](#) and the president’s proposed budget for 2005 that would distribute more than half of Homeland Security Funds according to threat levels.

But Bloomberg and other city officials do not think that this is enough; they believe that diluting this money among 80 recipients automatically means that New York will receive too little.

One commissioner, Bob Kerrey, agrees that New York City may not be able to ever get the resources it needs through Department of Homeland Security programs that take the entire country into account.

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The former Senator noted that it might be time to give New York special treatment because it is the country's primary target; he spoke of having Congress allocate a portion of the nation's budget directly to a fund for New York's public safety.

LESSONS LEARNED?

The 9/11 Commission has returned to Washington. In July, it will include what it has learned last week in its final report.

Meanwhile, the city continues to drill. Its police and fire departments cooperate or clash, depending on whom you ask; the Office of Emergency Management is still testing the city's new radio capabilities, and refining its coordinated emergency response plan.

After its headquarters in the World Trade Center were destroyed on 9/11, the emergency agency has moved to new headquarters, under the Brooklyn Bridge. The police department uncovered a plot to destroy that bridge last year. But officials say this is not a sign that nothing has been learned. They have backup headquarters in an undisclosed location, they say, and they intend to move the headquarters of the Office of Emergency Management into a new permanent location, in Brooklyn's Cadman Plaza...in late 2005.